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Language of Flowers in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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Abstract
Emily Dickinson is famous for her description of love, death and nature in her poetry, among which are a large number of poems dealing with the subject of "flowers." In these poems, Dickinson celebrates the beauty and power of nature reflected in flowers, and also makes the flowers emblems of her passion and thoughts. Dickinson, by the depiction of flowers, articulates her yearning for love and worldly success, and her frustration and depression as well. With her sensitive feelings and idiosyncratic imagery and expression, Dickinson, together with her poetry, has become a special flower never fading in the world literature.

Key words: Emily Dickinson's poetry; Language; Flowers

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INTRODUCTION

T. W. Higginson wrote to his wife immediately after his first (and perhaps last) meeting with Emily Dickinson, telling about his impression of the poetess and mentioning her unique introduction: "She came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort of childlike way into my hand & said 'These are my introduction' in a sort frightened breathless childlike voice"(L342). Dickinson was 40 years old that year, and she's believed to have meant it seriously when she took lilies as her "introduction."

As is well known, Dickinson lives, for most time of her life, in seclusion, and hides herself in the Homestead and her poetry as well. It is also well known that Dickinson has a special liking for flowers. She plants various flowers in the garden of her backyard, and, even in her most reclusive years, she frequently sends flowers to her friends as presents, or lowers a basket with sweets or flowers to children passing below her bedroom window. To some extent, she takes flowers as her spokesperson, articulating not only her joys and happiness, but the intense loneliness and turmoil of her inner world. As she writes, "I hide myself within my flower/ That fading from your Vase,/ You, unsuspecting, feel for me -/ Almost a loneliness" (Fr80).

According to some statistics, there are nearly 300 poems writing about nature, including natural phenomena and natural creatures, among which are a large number of poems writing about flowers. Thirty-three poems are listed under the entry of "flowers" in the Subject Index of the Johnson version of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, plus 11 poems under the entry of "Rose", 1 under "violet" and 1 under "Lily". In addition, flowers are also a hot topic in Dickinson's epistolary texts, as Mabel Loomis Todd observes, "The letters speak of flowers, of pines and autumnal colors" (xii). According to *Concordance to the Letters of Emily Dickinson*, there are 187 letters in which Dickinson talks about, or mentions, "flowers."

Apart from those which may indicate, either directly or suggestively, certain flowers without explicitly naming them, Dickinson's poems of flowers can be divided into two categories according to the subject: one dealing with "flowers" in general, and the other, specific flowers with names. In either of these two categories, Dickinson reiterates nature's beauty embodied in flowers, and also employs flowers to speak for her, her love of nature, her passion for love, her being overshadowed in the patriarchal society, and her resolution and will to hide

herself in her poetry. Flowers have their own language in Dickinson's poetry.

1. ROSE

The rose in poetry can be traced back to the English poetry in the Renaissance, and later be best illustrated in such famous poems as William Blake's *The Sick Rose*, Robert Burns' *A Red, Red, Rose* and Alfred Edward Houseman's *With Rue My Heart Is Laden*. These images of rose are generally associated with love or admiration for a beautiful woman. Dickinson is also an expert in depicting roses in her poetry, but in a distinctly different way.

Though holding that no poem of Dickinson's on the rose is "memorable" (Johnson 200) or "most seem unfinished or uninspired" (Ibid.), Thomas Johnson acknowledges that Dickinson "selected the rose more often than any other flower to write about" (Ibid.).

Dickinson's passion for roses may be traced to her mother, who grew and cultivated various roses in the garden. The garden in the Dickinson Homestead was well known for its long beds of roses. The rose is also a flower favored by Victorian artists and poets. Living in such domestic and social atmosphere, Dickinson is believed to have "a passionate attraction for the cultivated lily and rose, founded on their literary significance as well as their beauty" (Judith Farr, *Garden* 31).

The rose is frequently meant to symbolize beauty in lyrics, while Dickinson employs it in her poetry to denote an obscure and neglected existence. Among the flowers in Dickinson' exuberant garden, roses occupy a place not so conspicuous and they grow and wither silently, unconsciously reflecting the poetess' apparently uneventful life. In "A sepal, petal, and a thorn" (Fr25), the speaker declares that she is "a Rose," merging herself in the beauty of nature on a summer's morning.

Based on this equality between her and roses, Dickinson further employs the flower to present the status of women in a general sense in her times.

"Nobody knows this little Rose-" (Fr11) highlights a little rose, which is left lonely and ignored, easy to perish without being noticed. The obscurity of the rose is also Dickinson's, and she writes about her reclusive life in the poem.This poem reminds the reader of the famous "nobody" one:

> I'm Nobody! Who are you?
> Are you - Nobody - too?
> Then there's a pair of us!
> Dont tell! They'd advertise - you know! (Fr260)

This little rose is another "nobody." Written in 1858 and 1861, respectively, the two poems "Nobody knows this little Rose -" and "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" illustrate such a tendency: With the passing years, Dickinson's sense of frustration and loneliness evolves into a profound consciousness of self-negation. Compared to the rose used to present love or a beautiful characteristic of earlier English poetry, the flower is used by Dickinson more to convey her frustration both in her life and poetic creation, and her later determination to hide herself from the public.

"Little" is frequently used to modify flowers, if not the rose specifically, in Dickinson's poetry, as illustrated in "As if some little Arctic flower" (Fr177), in which the image of "little flower" is reiterated to highlight its insignificance and obscurity. The same humble image appears in another poem: "A Flower will not trouble her, it has so small a Foot" (Fr1648).

The illustration of her personality, indirectly conveyed by flowers in poetry, is more explicitly manifested in her epistolary texts. Dickinson depicts herself as having "a little shape" (L265) and looking like "the Wren" (L268), and further states that her life has been "too simple and stern to embarrass any" (L330).

Dickinson also realizes the short duration and frailty of the flower, as she writes in the poem as an elegy for Susan's niece, who died at the age of two: "She sped as Petals from a Rose-/ Offended by the Wind-" (Fr897). Rose, the beautiful flower, becomes "a metaphor for the frail and precious child" (Judith Farr, *Garden* 128).

Poem 772 is believed to be discussing poetic composition, comparing the process of poetry writing to the one of making "Essential Oils" and "attar from the Rose," reminding the reader of what Thomas Higginson, in his essay "Letter to a Young Contributor," talks about literature: "Literature is attar of roses, one distilled drop from a million blossoms" (qtd. Judith Farr, *Garden* 137).

2. DAISY

According to Greek mythology, "daisy" signifies joy and love, and can also be used to predict love as well. And daisy is also one of the flowers favored by the Pre-Raphaelite painters, and the painters and men of letters in Dickinson's time. However, daisy in Dickinson's poetry and epistolary texts is more like the sunflower in the mythology, docile and obedient, turning all the time around the sun.

Samuel Bowles gives a nickname to Dickinson: Daisy, which indicates the latter's subordinate femininity. Dickinson herself realizes the role of women in the society dominated by men, and, to some extent, she accepts the ideal personality of women in the society, as she writes in Poem 161:

> The Daisy follows soft the Sun-
> And when his golden walk is done-
> Sits shily at his feet -.

In the poem, the speaker admits that "We are the Flower - thou the Sun," and takes the sun, the embodiment

of masculine power, as the center of her world and goes after him all the time. Although the daisy signifies innocence in the Victorian language of flowers, according to Judith Farr, "the Dickinson daisy here can be a coy 'Marauder,' a demure yet crafty tease" (*Garden,* pp.39-40).

The same comparison between masculinity and femininity is demonstrated in "In lands I never saw - they say" (Fr108), embodied in two images: mountains as men, and, again, daisy as women. The "Alps" is described as "immortal" and "everlasting", while "daisy" is "Meek", at the feet of the mountains.

Given the cultural convention and 19th-century social surroundings in America, women still suffer from the patriarchal society in New England. As Thomas Wentworth Higginson observes, "The real disadvantage of women has lain in being systematically taught from childhood that it is their highest duty to efface themselves, or at least keep out of sight" (Farr 1).

Unprivileged by gender, Dickinson realizes the invisibility and fragility of women in the patriarchal society, which is also manifested in her pity for the flowers, including daisy. Turning around the sun, the flower gets hurt by the scorching sun: "It bloomed and dropt, a Single Noon -" (Fr843). The flower vanishes, as in "So has a Daisy vanished/ From the fields today - " (Fr19), leaving the poet skeptic of the final destiny of the obedient flower. The pessimistic attitude towards the prospect of female subordination is articulated in several other poems, while the word "perish" strikes much attention, as illustrated in the poem:

> How many Flowers fail in Wood -
> Or perish from the Hill -
> Without the privilege to know
> That they are beautiful -
> (Fr534)

3. OTHER FLOWERS

Besides daisy and rose, there are other flowers, with or without names, in Dickinson's poetry, and makes her writing a blossoming garden, like the big one in her backyard.

Poem 134 depicts the harebell:

> Did the Harebell loose her girdle
> To the lover Bee
> Would the Bee the Harebell *hallow*
> Much as formerly?

The bee is often seen together with flowers in Dickinson's poetry, another theme seemingly indicating the intercourse between. Written in a light and even teasing way, the poem depicts the harebell as docile and expectant, waiting for her lover. The similar theme can also be found in other poems including "The Flower must not blame the Bee -" (Fr235) and "There is a flower that Bees prefer -" (Fr642) . The latter is an 8-stanza long poem describing a single flower. Without naming the flower, the whole poem refers to the flower as a female and speaks of its characteristics: Her color is "purple"; her face is "rounder than the Moon/ ruddier than the Gown/ Of Orchis in the Pasture-/ Or Rhododendron - worn -"; "Her sturdy little Countenance/ Against the Wind - be seen -." This flower comes out early before "June," "contending with the Grass" and will not retreat its fragrance when the hill is full of other beautiful flowers. The whole poem reads like a riddle, revealing the answer little by little as the depiction progresses from stanza to stanza, with the last one emphasizing the flower's bravery and refusal to yield to defeat of the frost. The answer to this riddle can only be roughly speculated as the clover: Self-effaced, but determined and strong-willed.

The same "guess-what-flower-it-is" pattern appears in another poem:

> Pink - small - and punctual
> Aromatic - low -
> Covert - in April -
> Candid - in May -
>
> Dear to the Moss -
> Known to the Knoll -
> Next to the Robin
> In very human Soul -
>
> Bold little Beauty
> Bedecked with thee
> Nature forswears
> Antiquity - (Fr1357)

If Dickinson had not signed her name as "Arbutus-" at the end of the poem, the reader would have great difficult in solving the riddle. The arbutus is "punctual," "aromatic," "candid" and "bold", recommending itself to the speaker "by its virtue and decorum" (Judith Farr, *Garden* 193).

"The dandelion's pallid tube" (Fr1565), however, is more explicit in its treatment of the subject: the dandelion. The flower struggles, in the last days of winter, to uplift a "signal Bud" and "then a shouting Flower" as the "proclamation of the Suns" that the harsh days of the winter are over. This poem only has two stanzas, typical of Dickinson's laconic style. The image of the flower is highlighted, with both color ("pallid") and sound ("shouting" and "Proclamation"), while the word "signal" echoes with "over" in the last line, bringing forth the lively picture that with the blossoming dandelion come the warmth and hope of spring.

Dickinson writes about gorse in the two-line poem "The Juggler's *Hat* her Country is -"(Fr186), lily in "Through the Dark Sod - as Education -" (Fr559), clematis in "'Tis customary as we part" (Fr628), daffodils in "She dwelled in the Ground -" (Fr744).

CONCLUSION

Judith Farr gives a brief conclusion of the language of flowers in Dickinson's poetry:

> The heliocentric daisy represented faithful devotion; the gentian, determination, ability, industry in the face of difficulty and scorn; the violet, modesty and fidelity; the lily, hallowed beauty; the trailing arbutus, affection and pluck; the aster, the 'everlasting fashion' of eternity (Fr374); the rose, romance and/or conjugal joy (*Garden* 191).

It has long been acknowledged that Dickinson is fascinated with botany. The Homestead garden and conservatory have been the source of her poetic inspirations, and the flowers provide Dickinson with a variety of images and metaphors when she deals with whatever themes in her poetry, love, death, war, to name only a few.

Dickinson embodies her reflections and epiphany in her flowers and poetic characterization of flowers. She dreams of an idyllic world where flowers will never fade and life is always bright, as illustrated in the poem "There is another sky": "Here is a brighter garden,/ Where not a frost has been;/ In its unfading flowers/ I hear the bright bee hum."[1]

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[1] This poem is listed as No.2 in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, published by Little Brown and Company, in Boston and Toronto in 1960. It is not included in the Franklin version.